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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENGDU 000251

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CHENGDU LEADERSHIP PORTRAITS AND THE PERILS OF POOR TIMING

REF: A. 07 CHENGDU 30

[1](#)B. 06 CHENGDU 1016

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On the margins of several high-level events held in the Sichuan provincial capital of Chengdu during late October, contacts shared their views about local political leaders and how their careers are developing. There was wide consensus that Chengdu Party Secretary Li Chuncheng's career is in deep trouble after he incurred the wrath of Premier Wen Jiabao for opening an overly lavish new city headquarters right after the Sichuan earthquake. Although Deputy Provincial Governor Huang and Chengdu Mayor Ge get good reviews for competency, neither appears to qualify for rising star status. End Summary.

Party Secretary Li: If you build it~..

[1](#)2. (C) Chengdu's recent Trade and Investment Forum (presided over by Deputy Premier Li Keqiang) and Earthquake Reconstruction Conference (cosponsored by UNCTAD and the Ministry of Commerce) presented numerous opportunities for informal discussions with both longtime and new Congen contacts. Several well-connected local businessmen confirmed to us that Chengdu Party Secretary Li Chuncheng is in hot water vis-`-vis Beijing. Li, who has served in his current position since 2003 and is widely viewed as one of the principal forces behind Chengdu's building boom, was very unlucky when it came to the timing for completing his favorite project -- the city's new government headquarters. The massive new complex, complete with "bird's nest style" exteriors, occupies over 370,000 square meters and reportedly cost over USD 176 million.

[1](#)3. (C) Unfortunately for Li, city workers began moving into it almost immediately following the May 12 Sichuan earthquake thereby creating an image problem among local residents at a time of grief and shock. What really hurt Li, as one contact noted, was a visit by Premier Wen Jiabao to the new headquarters after Wen had traveled to areas worst hit by the earthquake and seen dead and injured being pulled from the rubble. The contact described how Wen left the city headquarters in disgust having spent less than three minutes in it. The contact commented it was at least somewhat fortunate the Premier never actually made it as far as Li's own luxurious office. Subsequently in mid-July, after being ordered to do so by Beijing, Li held a press conference in Chengdu in which he announced that those workers who had already set up shop in the new complex would be sent back to their old offices. The municipal headquarters

would be sold to private developers and the proceeds used for earthquake rebuilding.

14. (C) According to one contact, although it does not appear Li will be removed from his position, he is certainly not going to get the promotion he believes to be long overdue. Li had hoped to land a governorship, perhaps of a province in the northeast where he hails from originally. The contact remarked, however, as Li is already 52-years-old, it is too late for him to "come back from the dead." While agreeing fully that Li's career has been damaged, another contact reiterated the whole incident really came down just to poor timing and it was a "stupid waste" for Beijing to have ordered the new headquarters sold. The contact stressed no business firm would try to take over the complex because "it's just too big." He said none of the city employees who had already started to work there have left and speculated that after a couple of years or so, when things have settled down, the headquarters will be declared impossible to sell and be fully occupied by municipal departments.

Vice Governor Huang: Running a bit late  
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15. (C) Although presumably not a career damaging issue, Vice Governor Huang Xiaoxiang's own "timing" was somewhat off at the official opening of the Sichuan Trade and Investment Fair Exhibition on the rainy morning of October 27. Given the presence of Deputy Premier Li Keqiang and foreign VIPs (Prime Ministers of Sri Lanka and Laos, Vietnamese Deputy Premier, Philippine Vice President), security at the exhibition hall was intense and vehicle traffic in the vicinity heavily controlled. Anticipating a crunch, CG and US business executives got to the hall very early to staff the exhibition's USA Pavilion. In fact, we appeared to be the only foreign guests allowed in before security really shut down the site. Through the front entrance glass doors CG saw his British and Japanese counterparts being kept outside in the rain.

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16. (C) With the arrival of Deputy Premier Li's motorcade, the crowds outside were pushed away and Li Keqiang strode into the exhibition hall immediately followed by Sichuan Party Secretary Liu Qibao and Governor Jiang Jufeng. The group made a beeline for a photographic exhibit of Hu Jintao visiting earthquake survivors. Not too long after, there was a noticeable commotion out front and a very angry, red-faced, wet-looking Vice Governor Huang ran past uniformed police to try to catch up with Deputy Premier Li. The diminutive Huang grabbed a rather largish plainclothes security officer, shouted "what's wrong with you," punched him in the back, and rushed around him to join the other leaders.

17. (C) As one contact volunteered, Huang "really lost it." Apparently, security officials inadvertently/unexpectedly had cut off Huang's car from Li's motorcade. This made Huang, who had been given the honor to explain the Hu Jintao photos to Deputy Premier Li due to his close involvement in the specifics of earthquake relief, both late and furious. Another contact later noted Huang is generally respected, competent, and usually even-tempered. He added, however, that Huang is already fifty-two and probably does not have strong enough connections to advance much further. The front page of the next day's Sichuan "Huaxi Daily" had a good picture of Huang looking composed as he escorted Deputy Premier Li through the exhibition.

Mayor Ge: Comfortable Already  
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18. (C) Sitting cheek-to-jowl with Mayor Ge Honglin (strictly protect) at one of the many massive banquets held in Chengdu the last week of October, CG asked Ge about local rumors he might be moving on to Beijing. Ge, the former head of Baogang Steel in Shanghai has been mayor in Chengdu for over five years, has a good reputation for trying to be helpful to foreign investors, and has apparently escaped blame for the new municipal

headquarters fiasco. He laughed and said, "that's the last place I would want to go."

¶9. (C) Between toasts, Ge explained he really enjoys his work in Chengdu and believes he is making a difference both with earthquake rebuilding and trying to develop the city into a major regional transportation hub. Service in Beijing would be a "big headache" and sometimes it's better to be "away from the center." After he retires from the government, the fifty-two-year-old Ge said he would like to work as an advisor to a business firm and spend lots of time traveling overseas.

Comments

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¶10. (C) While they can be tedious and grow old quickly, large-scale banquets and other public events sometimes provide an opportunity for more spontaneous and open discussions with interlocutors than formulaic official meetings. As Deputy Governor Huang told CG at one of the recent banquets, after we had both been asked to get up from the table for about the fifteenth time to engage in individual toasting sessions, "you don't always get to eat at banquets, but the conversation is sometimes interesting and a lot of business can be done."

BOUGHNER